DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 040 837 RE 002 923

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TITLE	Intonation for Beginners.
PUB DATE	8 May 70
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the International Reading Association conference, Anaheim, California, May 6-9, 1970
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.70
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary School Students, Evaluation, *Intonation, Linguistics, *Oral Reading, *Primary Grades, Questioning Techniques, Reading Instruction, *Reading Research, Sentences, Testing

ABSTRACT

A Rutgers University project attempted to develop and test some ways of creating awareness of the elements of intonation in primary pupils because they found a connection between intonation and certain kinds of reading errors. They also worked out ways to get reading instruction usage from the awareness of juncture, pitch, and stress. They took the lessons on juncture, pitch, and stress to the primary classrooms and were successful in showing the children how these elements of intonation are related and how they operate, using sentences, oral reading of unpunctuated passages, and questions, respectively. References are included. (CL)

ED040837

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INTONATION FOR BEGINNERS

(For presentation at the 1970 IRA Convention Session entitled "Linguistics and Reading," Friday, May 8, 1970, 10:45 - 11:45 a.m.)

Recently a second-grade boy announced to me, "I found a mistake in my book." He pointed an accusing finger at page 20 of The King, the Mice and the Cheese (3). The picture showed a group of cats in hot pursuit of some mice. The text read:

> The mice-chasing cats did a very good job.

"Where is the mistake?" I asked.

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"Don't you see?" he answered impatiently. "In the picture the cats are chasing the mice. But the words say, "The ... mice ... chasing ... cats ... and the mice aren't chasing the cats. It's the other way around. Don't you see?"

I saw.

I saw that this boy recognized the words in the line, but he had miscued on the intonation of the line. He had read the words almost as if they were in a list rather than in a sentence. And without sensing the intonation pattern for the word mice-chasing, he couldn't comprehend the line.

So I read the text aloud to the boy, and sure enough, intonation aided comprehension.

After we talked a bit about the sentence, he said, "I get it. That tells what kind of cats they were. They were 'mice-chasing' cats. I guess the book didn't make a mistake after all."

I agreed that there was no mistake in the book. But I wondered if there might be a mistake of sorts, or at least an omission, in this child's instructional program. His miscue was an intonation-based error. But no information about intonation had ever been

called to his attention. Despite the fact that he constantly used the elements of intonation in speech and oral reading, he wasn't even aware of their existence.

Only within the last few years have linguists, researchers, and teachers become aware of the connections between intonation and certain kinds of reading errors. Goodman (2) showed some connections between intonational miscues and other types of errors in his linguistic taxonomy of reading errors. Morton (4), viewing reading as a part of continuous language behavior, saw that he could describe some reading errors as violations of syntax. Errors attributable to intonation are often violations of syntax. In a review of the literature on oral reading errors, Weber (6) indicated that researchers still have much to discover about miscues connected with intonation.

However, while awaiting those discoveries, primary-grade teachers can at least make their students aware of intonation and its elements (juncture, pitch, and stress) in hopes of precluding some intonation miscues. Pival (5) suggested that diagnosis and treatment of intonation problems will not only result in better oral

reading but will also improve comprehension. Most linguistically-oriented teachers have already read a basic linguistics text such as Allen's (1) and have thereby acquired some information about juncture, pitch and stress as the intonation elements in oral language. They know that a juncture is similar to a pause in speech or oral reading. (Junctures help a listener distinguish between Billy said, "Mother." and "Billy," said Mother.) They know that pitch involves a rise or fall in vocal tone. (Pitch helps a listener distinguish between Ready? as a question and Ready. as an answer.) They know that stress is similar to accent. (Stress helps a listener distinguish between homonyms in the sentence, Let's contest his decision on the contest.)

But it is one thing to have a nodding acquaintance with these elements of intonation. And it is quite another thing to know how to blend juncture, pitch, and stress into the primary reading-instruction program.

A group of graduate students at Rutgers University helped me develop and try out some ways of creating awareness of the elements of intonation in primary pupils. We also worked out ways to get reading-instruction mileage from this awareness of juncture, pitch, and stress.

Juncture

The following tape-recorded sample shows one type of approach we developed. This excerpt is taken from a first-grade lesson introducing juncture.

TEACHER: Boys and girls, close your eyes. I'm going to say three words. I think each of you will get a picture in your mind's eye when I say those three words. Be ready to tell me about the picture you get. Here are the words: Let's eat, Mother. What do you see?

STUDENT: I see some corn on the cob to eat and some crackerjacks and watermelon. There's a boy there, and he's hungry. So he's telling his mother, "Let's eat."

TEACHER: Good. Now close your eyes again. I'm going to say the same three words, but I think you'll get a different picture in your mind's eye. Let's eat Mother.

STUDENT: I see a big round pot and a circle of cannibals. Mother is in the pot, and the baby says to the family, "Let's eat Mother now." But the brother says, "Not now. She's not cooked yet."

TEACHER: You saw quite a picture! But explain something to me. The words were the same in the two sentences that you heard. But the pictures that you saw in your mind's eye

were not the same. So there must have been some difference between the sentences. Listen again and see if you can hear a difference in the way I say the sentences: Let's eat, Mother. Let's eat Mother.

STUDENT: You kind of stopped for a little in the first sentence.

TEACHER: Yes, in the first sentence I paused after the word eat before I went on to the word Mother. That pause is called a juncture. A juncture is a signal you can hear. Now I'll put the two sentences on the board.

Let's eat, Mother.
Let's eat Mother.

You heard a difference between the two sentences. Now do you see a difference?

STUDENT: (pointing at the comma) That little thing right there! That's the difference.

TEACHER: Right. That little thing is called a comma ...

As you could probably predict from this excerpt, the lesson went on to develop the relationship between the comma (a signal that pupils can see) and the juncture (a signal that pupils can hear).

> Many sentences that beginners meet in preprimers and primers include the comma of direct address. So a beginner must know the relationship between that comma and a juncture to read orally with natural intonation and to avoid miscues that hamper comprehension.

Pitch

Another technique that we developed for blending intonation into the primary reading program involved having students orally read an unpunctuated passage. The teacher used this exercise to call attention to pitch as an element of intonation, since a drop in pitch as well as a juncture signals the end of a sentence.

While listening, the pupils could note how the oral reader used falling pitch as an end-of-sentence signal. They could also discover how badly a reader needs punctuation.

Here is a sample passage, as printed on the chalkboard. Below the passage is excerpt from a tape of a second-grader reading the passage aloud. (The arrows show where the second-grader applied drops in pitch to the passage.)

Joe and Paul were racing Joe was
leading Paul was close behind Joe
glanced around Paul was up with
him now Paul was in the lead

STUDENT: Joe and Paul were racing↓ Joe was leading Paul↓ ... was close ... No, that's not right. Joe and Paul were racing↓ Joe was leading↓ Paul was close behind Joe↓ glanced ... Wait a minute. You know, this would be easier with periods. behind Joe glanced ... No. ... Paul was close↓ behind Joe glanced around ... That doesn't sound right. I'll start over again . . . . . .

When the students reached the last line of the passage, they had a hot debate over the proper placement of the drop in pitch and the juncture within that line. Which should it be?

Paul was up with him now↓ Paul was in the lead↓
or
Paul was up with him↓ Now Paul was in the lead↓

This type of lesson points out the connections among intonation and punctuation and comprehension. The miscues made by the oral reader are similar to those made by primary pupils who can't translate punctuation into intonation. Leroy-Boussion attributed much of the difficulty that beginners have with silent reading to their lag in internalizing intonation (5, page 100).

Stress

It was relatively easy to show primary pupils some connections between punctuation (printed signals) and juncture and pitch (oral signals). But it was harder to show primary pupils the connections between stress and oral reading, because there are so few ways of signaling stress in print. Sometimes printers use a different kind of type or an underline, but these features are rare in primary reading textbooks. And accent marks are not suitable fare for beginners.

So the job of the teacher becomes to help the student understand (1) that stress is a natural part of oral language, (2) that written language is not an exact reproduction of oral language, and (3) that one job of the oral reader is to supply meaningful stress from context.

But before the teacher can work on those concepts, the student has to be aware of stress. He has to discover that he stresses certain words in his stream of speech by saying them with extra force or loudness. He has to find out when and why he uses stress.

To help him start making these discoveries, a teacher might put this sentence on the board:

Jim has a new coat.

Then she might say, "Boys and girls, I want you to use the sentence on the board as the answer for each of the questions that I am going to ask you. You can't change the sentence. You can change only the way you say it."

The teacher could be sure of eliciting shifts of stress from the pupils by asking these questions.

1. Did you say Jim has a new boat? (Jim has a new coat.)
2. Did you say Jim has a blue coat? (Jim has a new coat.)
3. Did you say Tim has a new coat? (Jim has a new coat.)

Our tape recordings showed that many pupils managed to figure out from the sentences about Jim's new coat that stress can be used to emphasize a word. And they carried over into their oral reading the idea of emphasizing or stressing important words.

Beginning readers need awareness of juncture, pitch, and stress. They also need to know the relationships between intonation and punctuation. With only punctuation signals and context clues as guides, beginners must produce the appropriate variations of juncture, pitch, and stress when they read orally.

A few beginners do this job with ease.

Those few automatically transfer the natural intonation of their speech to their oral reading. But most beginners make miscues when they attempt this transfer. And some of these intonation miscues result in comprehension problems, such as the one that the second-grade boy brought to me when he had trouble with the sentence, "The mice-chasing cats did a very good job."

If primary-grade teachers want to do as good a job as those mice-chasing cats were doing, perhaps they should teach intonation to beginners.

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